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ABSTRACT

Instructors who accept responsibility for improving the spelling of their students, must, to be successful, turn that responsibility over to the students. Abjuring their position as rule givers, effective spelling teachers encourage students to pursue their study inductively by exploring the relationship of the spoken language to the written form, looking for why words are spelled as they are, finding orthographical regularities, and discovering their own mistakes. Students' problem words become the subject of error analysis, and exercises call for using them in different forms and contexts. The most effective skill-building techniques are also inductive. The following techniques can be used to turn weak spellers into strong ones: (1) urge students to identify and make a list of their problem words, analyze the list looking for patterns of misspellings, and then write their own "rules" which would help them avert the problem next time; (2) give the students learning strategies that activate the senses; (3) urge them to use mnemonic devices; (4) present the words in groups; (5) encourage them to use phonetics to help guide their spelling; (6) use latent learning; (7) teach them to use the rules of spelling; and (8) finally, use modern technology such as a spellchecking typewriter. The strength of this approach is that students acquire techniques they can use long after a course has ended to become more confident and effective spellers. (RAE)

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STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SPELLING

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STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SPELLING

ABSTRACT

When the theorizing is over and instructors face students who have minimal orthographical skills, what is to be done? Instructors who accept responsibility for improving the spelling of their students, must, to be successful, turn that responsibility over to the students. Abjuring their position as rule givers, effective spelling teachers encourage students to pursue their study inductively by exploring the relationship of the spoken language to the written form, looking for why words are spelled as they are, finding orthographical regularities, and discovering their own mistakes. Students' problem words become the subject of error analysis, and exercises call for using them in different forms and contexts.

The most effective skill-building techniques are also inductive. Multisensory strategies requiring students to involve their visual, auditory, and haptic senses include using color transparencies, Norman Hall's Letter Mark-Out Corrected Test, visual memory exercises, exaggerated pronunciation combined with visualization, and delayed copying. Mnemonic devices are effective with homonyms, the third largest source of spelling errors. Analysis of word groups that have the same feature (silent consonants, double letters, etc.) can improve a writer's control of words not studied individually.

The strength of this approach is that students acquire techniques they can, with sufficient self-discipline, use long after a course has ended to become more confident and effective spellers.

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SPELLING

It will come as no surprise to those of you here today that it's not only Tracy and Bob who have trouble with English orthography, but Jan and Sarah and Chuck and the rest of the students don't spell very well either. Students who haven't the smallest symptom of being learning disabled take their chances in choosing between t-h-e-i-r and t-h-e-r-e, vacillate about retaining the final silent e when adding a suffix, and obscure their handwriting when unsure of whether it's "i" before "e" or the other way around. In short, students of average and above average intelligence who can hold their own in classroom discussion, identify the location of Zanzibar, and sometimes solve quadratic equations often have problems spelling even simple words correctly.

The situation has been noted, lamented, struggled over and experimented with for years. Benjamin Franklin suggested that the solution to the problem was to simplify the way we spell our words. And that was in 1767. By the middle of this century researchers were suggesting that teaching spelling was a hopeless effort, and by 1971 Bobbie M. Anthony concluded that it should simply be eliminated as a serious pedagogical concern.

Nevertheless, most conscientious writing teachers, suspecting that the "sp's" we put on student papers principally serve an ornamental function, eventually search for strategies more effective

than having students write the word fifty times--an assignment that may be appropriate as fifth grade "punish work," but one that does almost nothing to improve a college student's spelling. In the ealy 1980's Zephania Davis reinforced that urge to do something to improve the situation by carrying out a study that found that even a weak method of spelling instruction for a minimal period of time each week will improve skills more than no instruction at all.

Given hope, then, what have we teachers discovered that works? If the others on this panel have waxed eloquent with learning and scholarship, let me take you away to the more mundane world of the pragmatic, the world of what a teacher can do on Monday morning with those students who drop the "d" in "saved" and write of the boy who "p-a-s-t" the course. Here, then, are strategies that teachers have found effective when dealing with the habitual misspeller.

Let me begin with some basic principles.

1. Spelling study should not be confined to "programs" or "units." Because it involves more than simply the relationship of letters and sounds, it must take place in the context of general language study. It should provide opportunities for students to explore the ways in which the spoken language is related to the written form. At the same time that the student is grappling with the correspondences of sounds and letters, he or she should also be dealing with letter sequences, word families, and the changes that occur as a word is transformed from a verb to a noun to an adjective. As Richard Hodges states, "every instance of writing and reading is a

potential moment for learning more about the properties of English spelling." Spelling instruction and vocabulary instruction, he explains, are two faces of the same coin.

2. A second basic principle is that spelling study should be an inductive process, not one in which an instructor presents the subject as a series of codified rules. Finding a reason for why a word should be spelled the way it is, is far more effective than memorizing isolated problem words. For example, students learn more from correcting their own tests than from teacher corrected ones. (And that's the good news for those of us who are tired of grading papers.)

3. Spelling study should involve as many of the senses as possible. Not surprisingly, visualization holds the place of most importance in remembering standard English spellings, followed closely by careful listening, but the kinesthetic and tactile senses can be helpful too.

4. Finally, spelling study should be carried on in an atmosphere that is relaxed enough to allow students to feel free to drill aloud and to make mistakes without fear, but intense enough to push them to move rapidly. In short, brief segments of study, carried out quickly, are more effective than long, slow ones.

Given these generalizations about the study of spelling, what techniques can be used to turn weak spellers into strong ones? Try

these:

1. Urge students to identify and make a list of their problem words. They can collect them from papers they have written, from diagnostic spelling quizzes, or from the areas of spelling insecurity they already know they have. There is little to be gained (and too much time to be lost) by going through lists of frequently misspelled words if they aren't those that the individual student frequently misspells.

Next, each student should analyze the personalized list, looking for patterns of misspellings by asking such questions as: Do I always hit a snag with silent "e's"? Do I repeatedly have trouble with final, silent consonants? Do my problems lie mostly in distinguishing between and among homonyms? As Richard Hodges points out, individuals make few, if any, random spelling errors. Each incorrect spelling has a cause. Students who want to improve their spelling can save themselves a fair amount of energy and time if they discover what that cause is.

Once the patterns are identified, students can try to "discover" the rules that would, if followed, have averted the errors. In other words, they write their own rules. If there is time, they can even "teach" their findings to the rest of the class (Geraldine Vale).

Anne Dodd suggests that each student can go on to set up a personal spelling dictionary. Problem words, in alphabetical order, are recorded in a notebook, each one used in a sentence and accompanied by notes deemed to be helpful--such as the category of error the word exemplifies. At least such a personalized dictionary

simplifies the process of looking up words for the speller who has trouble finding them in an unabridged version because they aren't spelled as expected.

2. Give students learning strategies that activate the senses.

a. Help them improve visual memory by writing a word in the air, using a finger to make the troublesome letters especially large. Ask them to try to imagine a word as if it were on an outdoor movie screen, stabilizing and holding that image as long as possible. Then mentally write a word in "longhand."

Instructors can also make use of the visual sense by using color-coded transparencies, or simply by underlining or capitalizing problem spots when writing words on the blackboard.

b. Invoke the auditory sense by exaggerated pronunciations. That is, emphasize the problem portion of word when saying it. For example, the person who habitually leaves off the final -d of <u>used,</u> should practice pronouncing the word as "you said." As Jeanne Ormrod and Lynn Jenkens point out, such a strategy allows students to encode a word's spelling in at least two different ways: auditorially as well as orthographically, thereby increasing the likelihood that the correct spelling can later be recalled accurately. (This technique can, of course, be combined with mental visualization.)

c. Use the kinesthetic and tactile senses by writing the problem word on paper, using a different kind of medium to write the difficult spots, changing from a ball-point pen, for example, to a crayon. The same technique can include a visual element if the student puts the problem letters in red or some other bright color.

d. An exercise that combines several senses is Norman Hall's Letter Mark-Out Corrected Test. It involves having students mark out any letter or letters missed in a word, write the correct letter or letters above the marked-out ones, and then rewrite the complete word to the side of the original misspelling. (See example.)

3. In addition to asking students to look for patterns of misspelling and to use their senses in carrying out spelling study, we teachers can urge students to use mnemonic devices. To suggest this approach is a little like saying "do anything that works," because the individual has to discover which mnemonic devices are personally effective. The only advice is that the more ridiculous the device, the more likely it is to be remembered. Absurd associations last longer than reasonable ones. (There is probably some generalization to be made about human nature in that statement, but I'll refrain.) We all know the ones about "the opposite of <u>all wrong</u> is <u>all right</u>, or the <u>principal</u> of the school is your <u>pal</u>, but more unusual connections are not difficult to come by, and are less likely to be forgotten.

4. As teachers we can present words in groups, either by looking at disparate words that present the same stumbling block--and yield to a similar solution--or by examining words that belong to the

same family.

a. Words that present the same problem for spellers include portmanteau words that have double letters (such as misspell and roommate). They can be words with the schwa sound, ambiguous consonant sounds, or silent consonants. An example of an exercise that can be used to clarify the spelling of words that have nothing to do with each other beyond the origin of their orthographical difficulties comes from Carol Chomsky, who points out that when dealing with words that have silent consonants, it is helpful to associate each one with a root word in a different form that does not silence the letter. For instance, the g in sign is easily heard in signature; the silent c in muscle is apparent in muscular. Groups of words that have consonant alternation become easier to spell after the exchange is noted and discussed--as in coincidental and coincidence, pirate and piracy, in which the "t" and "c" are alternated.

b. In the second recommended use of words groups, discussion of word families, the positive results are well-known: improvement of vocabulary, syntax, and sentence structure--as well as spelling. Such analysis can be carried out looking for words within words, by learning a few etymons, drawing up lists of cognates, and writing sentences and paragraphs that use a root word in as many different forms as possible. (Such practice makes for bad sentences, but fixes spelling variants in the writer's mind.)

5. Another piece of advice we can give our students is to

remind them that they can depend on their ears--sometimes. In 1963 a study at Stanford University sponsored by the Bureau of Cooperative Research of the United States Office of Education showed that English orthography closely approximates the structure of the oral code. Using computer techniques to analyze 17,310 words from the "common core" vocabulary, it proved that the spelling of English phonemes is much more consistent than was heretofore believed. The writer who listens well should, it stands to reason, also spell with reasonable accuracy.

The logic is less compelling, however, when faced with the demands of homonyms. Thomas Pollock, who made an extensive study of about 50,000 misspelled words in high school English papers, found that the third largest group of spelling errors grew out of confusion of homonyms and near homonyms. When sound alone cannot help the student distinguish between two words, Virginia Irwin's advice is helpful. She says to select the easier of the two words to remember, learn how to spell it and when to use it, then use the second one on all other occasions.

6. A powerful but often ignored method of study is suggested by Edward Tolman's theory of latent learning. Tolman describes a process of information acquisition that takes place just below the level at which it can be observed or demonstrated. The learner is not aware that he or she is learning. This process acounts, for example, for the sudden flash of insight that sometimes seems to occur from nowhere.

In terms of spelling study, latent learning can be utilized by keeping the correctly spelled problem words in the speller's line of sight for a week: on the desk, on bookmarks, on the mirror in the bathroom. The words need not be directly "studied." In a week, the correct spelling will have been internalized by the student.

7. In a pinch, the aspiring speller can fall back on rules. The learning of rules and jingles is a less effective method of study than others described here because it is not inductive; it does not allow students to discover for themselves how a word "works." However, if all else fails and one turns to the law, I suggest that Thomas Foran's "rules about rules" be followed. They are as follows:

a. Only a few rules should be taught, and only those that have few or no exceptions.

b. Teach only one rule at a time.

c. Teach a rule only when there is need for it.

d. Teach rules inductively, and integrate them with groups of words.

e. Review rules frequently.

f. Focus on the ability to use rules, not simply quote them.

8. Finally, as teachers we need not be afraid of emerging technology that can help our students turn in cleaner papers. A spellchecking typewriter can work marvels for the weak speller whose thoughtful essay is disfigured by basic orthographical confusion. The "electronic spellers" that sell for about $50 can help students identify errors quickly and constructively. By typing on a miniature keyboard, the writer can "look up" words. If they are not found under the typed spelling, the machine will suggest other words that are phonetically or visually close to the typed one. The uncertain writer can also request clarification of homonyms. Undoubtedly more sophisticated versions will appear in the near future, offering help to the spelling disabled. We should urge them to use whatever assistance is available, even from a machine.

One final word: We know that teachers can never turn students into good spellers. We also know that students left on their own with ineffective study strategies will never improve, no matter how long they work. But the positive side of this situation is that there are productive study strategies, which, when used in short periods of intense work, can make better spellers. The conclusion is clear: for those students who wish to improve their skills, we, as teachers, must stand ready to give them specific techniques by which they can continue to learn and improve long after they have left our courses.

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